

THE EVOLUTION OF THE TRINITY: A 21ST CENTURY "HYBRID" WAR THEORY

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ABSTRACT

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THE EVOLUTION OF THE TRINITY: A 21ST CENTURY “HYBRID” WAR THEORY

Whenever a theory appears as the only possible one, take this as a sign that you have neither understood the theory nor the problem which it was intended to solve.¹

—Sir Karl Raimund Popper

Whether studying the classical teachings of Antoine Henri Jomini, Carl Von Clausewitz, and Sun Tzu, or the more modern theories of B. H. Liddell-Hart, Colin Gray and Edward Luttwak, an explicit and stand-alone application of any one of these theories to modern warfare is not readily discernable. All however, when measured against the informed distillation of historical lessons learned and the benefits of advanced technology can serve today’s strategist in shaping a new and more fitting “hybrid” theory of war.

As the best grapes are harvested by the vintner to produce the finest wines, so too must the modern strategist decipher and select the best aspects of existing war theories to produce a refined theory of war for the modern international arena. The foundation of all war theories stems from four basic questions: What is war? Why and by whom are wars fought? What constitutes the nature, character and characteristics of war? How are wars won? This composition attempts to derive new answers to these questions through a careful analysis of classical and modern theorists alike, as measured against the harsh critique of history. The answers to these critical questions along with a dynamic evolution of Clausewitz’s remarkable trinity form the greater concept of a “hybrid” theory of war, providing a more congruous application of *ends*, *ways* and *means* to 21st century warfare.

What is War?

There are a number of conflicting answers regarding this question and many fail to accurately account for the changing characteristics of conflicts in the world, particularly when it comes to non-state actors. The term “war” has many meanings which can detract from its strategic significance (*war of words, war against illiteracy, war on drugs, etc.*). This paper avoids those distractions by focusing specifically on armed conflict at the strategic level.

The legal definition of war is: a contention by force; or the art of paralyzing the forces of an enemy...civil (between two parties of the same state or nation) or national (between two or more independent nations).² Merriam-Webster further defines war as a state of open and declared armed hostile conflict between states or nations.³ These definitions, however, fall short of addressing the issue of conflict involving non-state actors, a very real concern in the current strategic environment.

In comparing the classical theorists: Jomini, Clausewitz and Sun Tzu, while all three were in relative agreement as to the fundamental issues of war, each had very different perspectives on what defines war. Sun Tzu believed that war was the application of armed force to gain victory.⁴ Clausewitz viewed war as “an act of force to compel the enemy to do our will,”⁵ but also viewed war as but a stronger form of diplomacy.⁶ Jomini clearly defines the importance of the six principles of the art of war (statesmanship, strategy, grand tactics, logistics, engineering, and minor tactics), but gives no readily apparent definition of war itself.⁷ Of the more modern theorists, Liddell-Hart views war as the art of applying military means to fulfill the ends of policy;⁸ Gray defines war as organized violence threatened or waged for political purposes;⁹ and Luttwak believes that war is both the act of attrition through the application of superior

fire power and material strength to destroy the enemy's force, and the act of relational maneuver to incapacitate the enemy's systems.¹⁰

Although the environment that influenced the classical theorists differs greatly from that of the modern strategist, many of the basic philosophical concepts still apply. In order to frame their credence in today's environment, these enduring concepts of classical theory must be viewed through the modern lens of increased technology with a respect for the emerging trend towards asymmetrical conflict with non-state actors, as opposed to large scale conventional warfare. In this area, Jomini was particularly apropos in his view that superior armament, while a great element of success, is not the deciding factor in battle.¹¹ While the advent of nuclear weapons, aircraft, cyber networks and space systems have had a noticeable impact on the ways in which wars are fought, they have done little to change the essence of what defines war. Consequently, their impact will be addressed in a later section of this work.

Politics is defined as competition between competing interest groups or individuals for power and leadership.¹² Despite the variances in the definitions of war previously mentioned, all share a common link to strategy and policy. Clausewitz, Liddell-Hart and Gray state it specifically in their references to diplomacy, policy and politics. Further review of the other theorists also reveals ties to strategy and policy. Sun Tzu with his dictum: "If not in the interests of the state, do not act,"¹³ Jomini in his view that a statesmen concludes whether a war is proper, opportune, or indispensable and determines the operations necessary to attain the object of war,¹⁴ and Luttwak with his belief that the interactions at the military levels yield final results within the broad setting

of international politics.¹⁵ War, in its basic sense, is therefore defined as the strategic application of organized violence to achieve political *ends*.

Why and by Whom are Wars Fought?

Answering the second half of the question first, wars are fought between states, nations, or parties. The latter includes non-state actors such as insurgents, guerilla forces and terrorist organizations, which arguably presents a greater focus for today's strategist than was the case during the period of the "Cold War", which, by definition (open hostility *short of violence*,)¹⁶ is an oxymoron. In line with Clausewitz, war is a continuation of political intercourse carried on with other means,¹⁷ when diplomacy alone has failed to achieve the desired strategic effect. Most modern day strategists would agree with Sun Tzu's postulation that subduing the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.¹⁸ For the U.S., this idea is evident in the sixth axiom of the Weinberger Doctrine, which states that a combat role should be undertaken only as a last resort.¹⁹ Unfortunately, while a peaceful solution is routinely professed to be the most desired course of action, history has repeatedly shown that this is much easier said than done.

So what is it that triggers states, nations, or parties to choose war over a peaceful, diplomatic solution? There are myriad factors that can influence this decision, but research indicates that a single "master cause" of all wars does not exist. Most wars occur because a number of important factors are simultaneously present that reduce the likelihood of a peaceful resolution.²⁰

Fear, honor and interest play large roles in the decision to choose war and seem to compose another common thread among theorists that is traceable back to Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War.²¹ Fear that not acting will lead to greater problems, such as the belief that failure to act against the spread of communism in

Vietnam would increase the Kremlin's area of control to a point that, as the National Security Council (NSC) document 68 warned, no coalition could adequately be assembled to confront it.²² Honor, stemming from a perceived need for retaliation, such as the U.S. responses after Pearl Harbor and the attacks of 9/11; preservation of hard earned power or status, such as Ecuador's rise to defeat a September 30, 2010 coup d'état attempt; revenge for some perceived injustice, exemplified by the actions of the Kosovar Albanians under the policies of Slobodan Milosevic²³. Often intertwined with the drivers of fear and honor, the interests of the involved nation, state, or party, can include economic stability, power, status, religion, ethnicity and a host of other potential contributors. Interests can even be linked through an indirect obligation, such as the need to defend an ally under attack who has been promised protection in order to preserve the larger interests of the protector, or as a means of preserving the reputation and sovereignty of a state that has given its word to uphold an agreement.

In determining a threshold for war, it is vitally important that strategic planners and advisors understand and adhere to the documents intended to provide strategic direction, for it is this direction that serves as the common thread in integrating and synchronizing the activities of strategic planners,²⁴ and informing the world view and key decisions of strategic leaders. Arguably, non-state actors will not be coupled to such a capacious collection of documents, but their world view will be shaped by other less formal documents, sometimes religiously based, that will carry no less legitimacy in their eyes.

The primary governing documents for the U.S. include: the National Security Strategy (NSS); the National Defense Strategy (NDS); the National Military Strategy

(NMS); and the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR).²⁵ All four documents are essential in building a foundation on which to frame U.S. strategic decisions and recommendations. They ensure both are indelibly linked to national interests, particularly when it comes to rationalizing the use of force. This is where the decision to go to war must be inextricably linked with strategy and policy.

The NSS is the driving document for U.S. national security policy and serves to define the political *ends* (objectives) that must be met, based on four enduring core interests.²⁶ The document also highlights the dramatic influence that non-state actors will continue to have on the world around them as economic growth creates new centers of influence and more nations assert themselves regionally and globally.²⁷ This is further supported by the view that states with weak, failing, and corrupt governments will increasingly be used as safe havens for an expanding array of non-state actors that will breed conflict and endanger stability as stated in the NMS.²⁸

The NDS, NMS, and QDR, are supporting documents for the NSS, and define the strategic *ways* (concepts) that each echelon utilizes to link their focus of effort back to the NSS. The strategic *ways* describe the strategic approach to achieving the desired *ends*.²⁹ The NDS defines five key objectives to support the NSS³⁰ and the NMS, in turn, establishes four supporting military objectives.³¹ The QDR adds to the NDS by providing additional direction to the Department of Defense (DoD) through a long-term (next twenty years) projection of the ways DoD needs to progress in order to remain relevant to meeting the challenges of current and future environments.³² Additionally, the QDR identifies ten key defense priorities and highlights how atypical threats ranging from

non-state terrorist groups to large state competitors will look to exploit holes in U.S. defenses through unconventional means.³³

Like the concepts defined in the NDS, NMS, and QDR, the use of organized violence is one of many *ways* to achieve political *ends* and the employment of military forces is the resource (*means*) to achieve those *ends*. The *means* however, are more than simply tangible resources, such as military forces, military technology, and available financing. Also included, are intangible resources, such as cultural appeal, goodwill from previous activities, and the competence, knowledge and abilities of the military forces being employed.³⁴

Cultural awareness and an incisive cognition of the adversaries' interests are additional factors that must always be measured as key elements of the equation. A working knowledge of basic cultural traits (our own and others) minimizes unpleasant surprises; provides insights in advance and enables successful strategy interaction.³⁵ The U.S. consistently fails to understand others because of "cultural black holes," core beliefs of such gravity that they cannot be questioned, which prohibit intelligent or perceptive analysis of others' cultures and agendas.³⁶ This often creates undesired perceptions which, unchecked, can compel an adversary to choose violence over other, less severe, forms of conflict resolution. While understanding the adversaries' point of view may not ultimately change the decision to go to war, it certainly assists in informing a plan that is better suited for success should that decision be made.

Selecting the best *ways* and *means* to achieve the political *ends* is a wicked problem that rests squarely on the shoulders of strategic planners and advisors. This selection must be devoid of emotion and adeptly balanced across national interests,

alliances, cultural influences and public views. When measured against all potential strategic options, if force is deemed the most efficacious or only way to achieve the desired *ends*, the appropriate level of force must then be selected from the total Range of Military Operations (ROMO) to achieve the desired strategic effect. This can extend from military engagement, security cooperation and deterrence activities up through major operations and campaigns.³⁷

For any state, nation, or party, when core interests are in jeopardy and other means of deterrence prove ineffective in protecting those interests, the threshold for war has been crossed and the only remaining alternative is the use of force. Thus, wars are fought when honor and interests are threatened, the threshold of fear is exceeded and other forms of diplomacy are incapable of countering that threat.

What Constitutes the Nature, Character and Characteristics of War?

The answer to this question is a little more complex by virtue of the many elements that influence and characterize war. While the character and characteristics of war will inevitably change over time, the nature of war in perpetual and its most basic element is violence. When the decision is made that war is the only way to achieve the desired political *ends*, then combat forces (*means*) must apply violence with the utmost resolve and in the appropriate capacity to decisively meet the desired intent. This is supported by Jomini, with his focus on “decisive points” and “concentration of force against weakness,”³⁸ and by Clausewitz with his dictum that: “war is an act of violence pushed to its utmost bounds.”³⁹ General Rupert Smith, another modern theorist, further supports this with his view that the underlying purpose of military force is to kill people and destroy things, but underscores the importance of understanding why one is acting,

what strategic goals are to be achieved and where, when, and how force is to be applied.⁴⁰

War is characterized by many levels. One of the most basic characteristics of war is its inherent complexity. Clausewitz makes this point in his statement that “war is more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case.”⁴¹ Sun Tzu reinforces Clausewitz’s view with his metaphors: “as water has no constant form, there are in war no constant conditions,”⁴² and “the primary colors are only five in number, but their combinations are so infinite that one cannot visualize them all.”⁴³ Whether studying the wars of Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, or Afghanistan, this complexity is readily apparent in the unexpected difficulties faced during these epic conflicts. At the root of this complexity is the fact that, in war, we are fighting a real enemy that must always be kept in mind,⁴⁴ an enemy that is adaptive and actively working to counter our every move in order to achieve *his* desired political *ends*.

The character of warfare can be limited or total, conventional or asymmetrical, nuclear, civil, or guerilla, but irrespective of the title, complexity and violence serve as the common thread that interweaves them all. Future wars will include both change and continuity from the past, which will inevitably reshape the character of war over time.⁴⁵ This adaptive process has produced a trend of warfare more in line with Sun Tzu’s indirect approach, consistently limited in scope, with non-state actors such as guerilla forces and terrorist groups using asymmetrical warfare against larger state actors.

Limited war is not a new concept; during the nuclear arms race of the Cold War it was essential in providing potential military options short of the total destruction of civilizations. While the arms race with the former Soviet Union has subsided, the

possibility of nuclear war remains a legitimate concern. Potential rogue nations like North Korea and Iran, despite constant international pressure, continue to actively pursue a nuclear weapons capability which, if realized, will likely impact the fear and interests of neighboring states such as South Korea and Israel. The ensuing pressure and tension from global and regional alliances would inevitably tip the scale in the direction of conflict escalation. With the number of failed states increasing and nuclear states like Pakistan and India struggling to maintain order within their borders, the risk of non-state actors acquiring Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) also remains a key concern.

“Total Wars,” such as the Napoleonic and World Wars, involved entire nations. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, no single state possess the conventional equipment, forces, technology and training to compete unilaterally with the U.S. on a military level, making the traditional model of force on force attrition warfare, anticipated by the U.S. during the Cold War, likely a thing of the past. “Likely” does however, warrant a requisite level of caution in preparing for the range of potential future conflicts, not just for the U.S., but for all nations. It is also important to keep in mind that even though the numbers of major state actors are limited, even the strongest superpower can be substantially offset by a unified and cohesive coalition of less powerful nations who, in following the enduring guidance of Sun Tzu, may seek to disrupt alliances or attack allies in order to weaken a stronger nations’ position.⁴⁶ Al Qaeda, with its support for multiple terrorist attacks against U.S. allies across the globe, is a prime example.

The challenges of today’s struggling global economy have caused nations to reevaluate the prioritization of core interests with a greater emphasis on economic

prosperity and trade through increased globalization. Many European nations have shown a willingness to accept more military risk by restructuring investment priorities away from defense spending in order to strengthen their economies. This shift in priorities, in a highly competitive globalized world, makes global alliances more critical than ever, not just as a means to increase regional security, but as a means to continue economic growth and capitalize on emerging trade sources, like Africa, China and India.

Nations such as Nigeria and Niger continue to increase their status as global trade partners, exporting large percentages of oil and rare earth minerals to major investors like the U.S. and China. This trade will reshape the future global and regional interests of actor's. China and India, two of the world's most populous nations, continue to grow their economies at a staggering rate. This unprecedented growth will result in increased urbanization and subsequent demand for more consumer imports, which will inherently increase the demand for already limited global resources, such as petroleum, bauxite, and water. With the future availability of such limited resources in question, calculations of fear, honor, and interests for the competing nations will unavoidably change. The challenge lies in trying to accurately predict the outcome of that change over time and prudently prepare for a future about which nothing is known in reliable detail.⁴⁷ As a result, capabilities must be developed so that they are sufficiently adaptable to cope with a range of security challenges.⁴⁸

Although the inevitable maturing of national interests makes a future conventional conflict between major powers possible, such a conflict is arguably unlikely because the money and resources required to fight a major theater war would devastate the economic growth that rising powers like India and China have worked so hard to

achieve. The Chinese government alone estimates that it needs to grow at a rate of 8% per annum to avoid excess unemployment and social unrest,⁴⁹ a rate of growth that would be impossible to achieve in the shadows of a major conflict. While this will likely drive China to think hard about the economic impact of a decision to use force, it will certainly not prevent that option if its core interests, such as the ability to grow at the required rate, are perceived to be in jeopardy. For this reason, the conventional military capabilities and evolving national interests of rising powers like China and India must be closely monitored.

Regardless of its form; war, as previously mentioned, requires extreme violence in its execution. This violence, however, is neither continuous nor the sole component of war. The four elements of power, Diplomatic, Information, Military, and Economic, which compose the D.I.M.E., must serve a collective approach to achieving political *ends*. Crossing the threshold of war with the use of the big “M” of military violence does not mean abandonment of the other elements of the D.I.M.E. War, as Clausewitz stated, does not suspend political intercourse or change it into something entirely different.⁵⁰

The recent war in Iraq profoundly illustrates the importance of this approach. Had the Coalition in 2007 held steadfast to the failing two fold military strategy of the previous year to transition security responsibilities to the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and conduct a Counter Terror (CT) mission to kill or capture terrorists and extremists,⁵¹ the successes now realized in Iraq would likely have been far less. General David Petraeus, Commanding General Multi-National Forces-Iraq (MNF-I), and U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker, insisted on relating the effects of strategy implementation to the desired

strategic *ends* by reevaluating the war strategy through all four elements of the D.I.M.E. This allowed them to successfully lead the coalition in reshaping a new approach that focused on protecting the population, attacking insurgent networks and building the legitimacy of the Government of Iraq (GOI).⁵² This significant change in policy resulted in dramatic progress by the end of 2008⁵³ and arguably served as the catalyst for an environment that enabled the eventual drawdown of Coalition forces.

The significance of the human element is also critical to the character of war. Sun Tzu and Clausewitz weighed this element heavily; Sun Tzu, with his focus on controlling the “moral and mental factors”⁵⁴ and Clausewitz with his view that “the physical [factors of war] seem little more than the wooden hilt, while the moral factors are the precious metal, the real weapon, the finely-honed blade.”⁵⁵ Jomini has often been criticized for attempting to develop a scientific theory, or more systematic approach to warfare,⁵⁶ but even he, like Clausewitz, repeatedly highlights the importance of the commander’s intuition, experience and *coup d’oeil* (ability to accurately evaluate things at a glance).⁵⁷ Liddell-Hart further supports this concept with his view that, in war, the chief incalculable is the human will.⁵⁸ And Edward Luttwak asserts that simple things can become enormously complicated when there is a live enemy opposite, who is reacting to undo everything being attempted with his own mind and strength.⁵⁹

Because war is between human beings with individual thoughts and emotions, it is, by its very nature, unpredictable and complex. This equivocal nature of war contributes to what Clausewitz refers to as “Friction” or the “Fog of War”⁶⁰ and accentuates its inherent complexities. These complexities demand that those in the business of policy and strategy maintain an adaptive approach to strategic thinking to

account for the changing characteristics of warfare over time. Sun Tzu supports this notion with his theory of adaptability⁶¹ and General Rupert Smith emphasizes that response and adjustment are as much a part of a plan of attack unfolding as the original blueprint.⁶² If coalition forces had failed to apply this adaptive approach in Iraq, the outcome of the war could have been far worse, and the cost in blood and treasure far greater.

How are Wars Won?

The intuitive response to this question is “to destroy the enemy,” but this answer warrants further consideration. While the destruction of the enemy forces in a given battle may achieve a tactical victory, failure to tie these actions to the political *ends* can result in strategic failure. As previously mentioned, any use of force must be measured against the desired strategic effect. Based on the nature, character and characteristics of the war being fought, the destruction of enemy forces may not be the desired strategic goal, as military victory does not automatically guarantee ultimate political victory.⁶³

Vietnam distinctly provides such an example, with the U.S. winning the majority of tactical engagements, but losing the greater war. The strategy in Vietnam was improvised rather than carefully designed,⁶⁴ with the administration vastly underestimating the enemy’s capacity to resist, and not confronting the crucial question of what would be required to achieve its goals until it was bogged down in a bloody stalemate.⁶⁵ As a more recent example, the 1991 Gulf War proved that the decisive destruction of Saddam Hussein’s military force, did not necessarily achieve the strategic effect the U.S. desired.⁶⁶

Ultimately, war is about compelling the enemy to do our will, but in the sense that we are able to achieve our political and strategic objectives through the successful translation of military victory into a political environment that is an improvement over what existed before the use of force.⁶⁷ Gray further captures this theory with his statement that “in war one is fighting for peace, not just any peace, but a peace that makes the war worthwhile...as peace of one kind or another must follow war, so war must follow peace.”⁶⁸ The goal may be, as Liddell-Hart put it, “to simply achieve a better state of peace,”⁶⁹ but this statement alone does not provide enough guidance with regard to political *ends*.

Clearly defining the political *ends* is essential to defining what victory should look like and should always precede the decision to go to war. Clausewitz reinforces this with his emphasis on the imperativeness of not taking the first step without considering the last.⁷⁰ As discussed previously, war is complex, dynamic, and unpredictable. Because war is an extension of policy, the cultural influence on the people of the states, nations, and/or parties involved will inevitably contribute to shaping their final definition of victory.

There are always two sides to political will, ours and theirs, but the need for support in sustaining political will is abiding, as Sun Tzu astutely highlights in his recognition of national unity as an essential element of victory.⁷¹ The U.S. has clearly seen in Vietnam, Somalia and Iraq, how a loss in public support can force a significant modification to the original idea of victory. Governments act on behalf of the communities they rule or govern, and no matter how authoritarian the system of government, political leaders must be attentive to the sentiments most popular in their society.⁷²

The will of the people and the adaptive requirements of modern warfare often require political *ends* to be adjusted throughout the period of conflict as the other elements of the D.I.M.E. add to or detract from the complexity of the problem. These revisions to the end state will inevitably change the conditions for victory.⁷³

War on any scale, extols a heavy price of blood and resources. Because of this tremendous tax on the use of force, the political *ends* required to define victory must not only be clear, they must be reasonably achievable as well. Since war is not an act of senseless passion, but is controlled by its political objectives, the value of those objectives must determine the sacrifices to be made in both magnitude and duration.⁷⁴ Clausewitz said, “no one in his senses ought to start a war without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it, the former being its political purpose and the latter its operational objective.”⁷⁵ Without clearly defined political *ends* and the reasonable means to achieve them, the prospect of a protracted war is irrefutable and, as Sun Tzu proclaimed, no country has ever benefitted from a protracted war.⁷⁶ The cost of our conflicts in Viet Nam, Iraq and Afghanistan and their impact on unity and political will are palpable examples. Where Sun Tzu’s proclamation falls short is in its underestimation of the benefits of a protracted war for non-state actors seeking to inflict a cost burden, in terms of blood and treasure, on a more powerful and resourceful adversary.

Ideally, wars are won when the political *ends* are met, but achieving the political *ends* for one adversary usually means failing to achieve them for another, with the defeated state often considering the outcome merely transitory evil, for which a remedy may still be found in political conditions at some later date.⁷⁷ In the end, if the above

contributors make the prospect of achieving a political victory untenable, then Liddell-Hart's goal of simply achieving a better state of peace (at least from our own point of view) may be the "least worst" option under the circumstances. Iraq, as an example, has not produced the type of western democracy originally envisioned, but its emerging form of democracy, if sustained, will likely create more stability than the regime it replaced.

The Role of Technology in Shaping the Characteristics War

Applying these fundamental concepts in the 21st century must also take into account the sophisticated byproducts of technology. From the advent of the aircraft carrier and nuclear submarine, to advances in aviation and the introduction of the Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV), to space and cyberspace growth and relevance, all have had a notable impact on strategy and the characteristics of war, but have not changed the basic nature of war. While technological breakthroughs in information systems have significantly reduced the "fog of war," the architecture of these systems has created a new vulnerability for the enemy to exploit through cyber attacks.

For those actors that can afford to modernize their military capabilities with the latest advances in technology, the increased effectiveness of precision stand-off weapons systems, improvements in manned and unmanned delivery platforms, and increased ability to project power can, in some cases, achieve strategic effect with far less risk to personnel. These same advances however, have driven less technologically progressive forces to new and innovative approaches to counter the immensity and sophistication of the conventional power associated with major state actors, reemphasizing Clausewitz's chameleon-like characteristic of war. This has prompted a divergence from 19th century attrition warfare and the concepts of Jomini and

Clausewitz that support it, in lieu of the indirect approaches advocated by Sun Tzu, Liddell-Hart, and to a lesser extent, Luttwak with his theory of relational maneuver.⁷⁸

A review of Al Qaeda's operations since the late 1980's reveals relevancy in nearly all thirteen chapters of Sun Tzu's: *The Art of War*.^{79 80} Take the following two examples: 1) *Waging War*- "When the army engages in protracted campaigns, the resources of the state will not suffice;"⁸¹ 2) *The Nine Varieties of Ground*- "Take him unaware by surprise attacks where he is unprepared."⁸² Both show an undeniable correlation with the actions of Al Qaeda over the last decade.

The Evolution of the Remarkable Trinity

The previously outlined analysis of classical and contemporary war theory in light of modern conditions drives a natural evolution of Clausewitz's remarkable trinity, particularly because of a dynamic shift away from the traditional attrition warfare of Clausewitz's era. Today, the empowerment of smaller non-state actors versus larger conventional forces, is causing attrition warfare, in which the objective is the destruction of enemy forces, to evolve into exhaustion warfare, in which the lesser capable force seeks to protract the conflict so that the cost in blood and resources exceeds the will of the larger force. This protractile approach to warfare inherently increases the influence the civilian population has on the political will that drives the outcome of a war. This not only gives the people more power in shaping the decisions of the governing authorities, and combatants involved, but also raises the importance of technology as a means of reducing civilian casualties through improved Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) systems and precision guided weapons.

The remarkable trinity, as defined by Clausewitz in *On War*, arguably has two interpretations. The first defines the three aspects of war as: 1) primordial violence

(*passion*), hatred and enmity; 2) the play of *chance* and probability; and 3) its subjectivity to reason (*rationality*) as a subordinate element of national policy. The second simplifies these definitions into: 1) the people; 2) the commander and his army (military forces); and 3) the government.⁸³ While many argue that this later approach is an oversimplification of Clausewitz's intent, I believe that both views warrant consideration in framing a more modern version of the trinity for today's diverse strategic environment.

Although the people, the army (military), and the government form the foundation of the three aspects of the trinity, the more descriptive elements of the first interpretation show the inherent complexity and driving force behind the adaptivity that is a byproduct of modern unconventional warfare. Clausewitz did not equate passion, chance, and rationality with, respectively, the people, the army and the government, but he did assert the prominent connections between the three elements.⁸⁴ Through careful review of his reference to the trinity in *On War*, this is evident when he uses the word mostly in linking the application of the elements of the first interpretation to that of the second.⁸⁵

While passion primarily relates to the people and their will to support, condemn or remain indifferent to a conflict, it also influences the actions of government and military personnel. As a byproduct of near-real-time media coverage and advances in communications technology, passion is also much more prone to rapid, volatile fluctuations than in the past. Chance and probability, while primarily linked to military action, the dynamic and complex nature of war, and the role that courage and talent play in the commander and his army, also impact the politics of the government, or even the perception of the civilian population (people). Rationality, as a subject of policy,

primarily relates to the government, but also influences the decision making of the people and the military. Therefore, the people, the military, and the government form the dominant aspects that influence war, but the characteristics that make up the complexities of warfare (passion, chance, and rationality), which are inherent in all forms of conflict, cannot be as stringently defined. Their influence will often transcend the lines of the dominant elements of the trinity. This inherently unstable relationship is a direct representation of the true nature of war. It is this change in the relationship of the elements that demands a new approach to account for the migration from attrition to exhaustion warfare, the rising involvement of non-state actors in war, the increased influence of the people on political will, and the increased volatility that is a byproduct of technological growth.

The Fire Triangle and the War Tetrahedron

Clausewitz's trinity is remarkably analogous to the "Fire Triangle,"⁸⁶ in that fire is dependent upon oxygen (*or an oxidizer*), fuel and heat, with the volatility of the fire dependent on the relative mixture of all three elements. War, similarly, occurs when the relative mixture of government (or governing authority), military, and people, influenced by the elements of passion, chance, and rationality reach a volatile state of combustion. But the traditional triangle of the remarkable trinity does not adequately portray the complexities of warfare previously discussed. For that, a new and more adaptive model is needed.

Recently the fire triangle was replaced by the more appropriate "Fire Tetrahedron," because the former failed to account for the chemical reaction that is combustion.⁸⁷ Using this model as a base, the elements of Clausewitz's original trinity are modified, slightly, to portray the fundamental elements necessary to wage war:

strategic interests (government), organized violence (military), and the actions and resolve of the population (people). Without combatants (military), the *means* does not exist to utilize organized violence. Organized violence cannot be used to achieve political *ends* if policy from an accepted governing authority (government) has not been defined. And war cannot be sustained without support from at least a portion of the population (people), even if that support comes through indifference. By adding a fourth element to account for the transcendent nature of passion, chance, and rationality, and the other influences of diplomacy, operations short of war, culture, religion and threats, the complex nature of these influences across the main aspects can then be realized in a more dynamic model, the “War Tetrahedron” (Figure 1).

Once war is initiated, the model remains useful in depicting the interaction of the various elements throughout the lifecycle of war. For example, changes in the actions and resolve of the population (of either side), the loss of military forces, the impact of culture, religion, diplomacy, information, the economy, or the perception of an increased threat, all serve to either accelerate the flames of war, or frame the conditions for resolution (victory) and reflect the characteristic of increased volatility previously discussed.

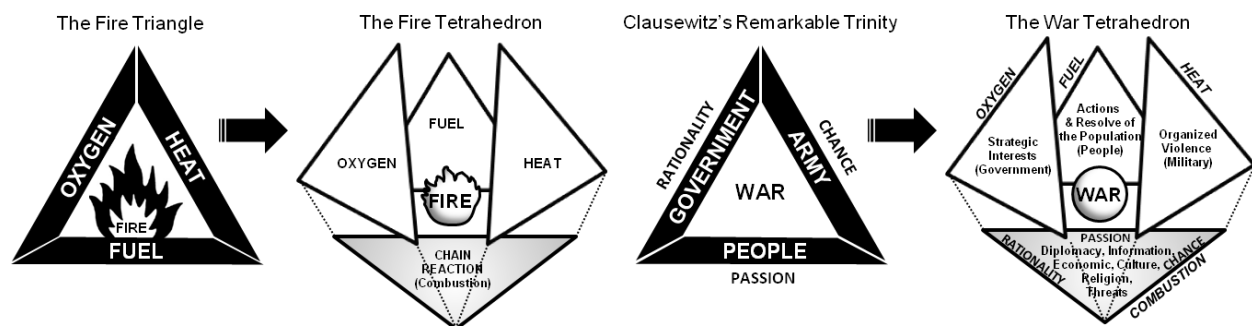


Figure 1: The Evolution of the War Tetrahedron

Like oxygen in the Fire Tetrahedron, strategic interests are ever present, as is the “heat” of potential organized violence. These combine with the actions and resolve of the population to potentially generate enough fuel to initiate combustion and create a state of war. Before war reaches its flash point however, the elements of the lower triangle are measured as influences across the other three elements. Drawn through the transcending filters of passion, chance and rationality, the resultant formula can either disrupt or advance the chain reaction of war, much like applying the chemical Halon or an accelerant can disrupt or speed up, respectively, the chain reaction of combustion. While this rendition of the trinity is more complex than Clausewitz’s original version, it inherently captures the hybrid character of 21st Century warfare by melding the essence of war theory with the conduct of war.

Conclusion

War in its basic sense, is defined as the strategic application of organized violence to achieve political *ends*. It is fought when honor and interests are threatened, the threshold of fear is exceeded and other forms of diplomacy are incapable of countering that threat. War is complex and has many levels. The human element of war only increases this complexity when coupled with the added influences of passion, culture, religion, chance, and rationality. War requires extreme violence, executed with the utmost resolve, but the degree of violence must be closely balanced against the desired strategic effect while continuing to evaluate the other elements of the D.I.M.E.

The goal in war (victory) is to achieve the desired political *ends*, which must be realistically attainable. If the “fog of war” precludes this end state, then as Liddell-Hart said, “a better form of peace” may be the best that can be achieved. As technology continues to advance, adversaries with limited resources will continue to find creative

ways to counter these technological advances, and maintain the trend toward an unconventional exhaustion style of warfare. For nations with large conventional capabilities, this requires an adaptive approach to strategy. One that recognizes the inherent need for strategic pliancy by remaining poised for conventional forms of conflict with rising powers and potential coalitions, in addition to the threats presented by non-state actors with less conventional forces.

The “hybrid” theory of war set forth in this document is the result of combining the best aspects of existing war theories with the unique influences of the current strategic environment to produce a refined theory of war for the modern international arena. While many of the examples used in this document correlate directly to U.S. interests, any state, nation, or party capable of war should find the immutable nature of these fundamental concepts intuitively relevant. As an amalgamation of the “best practices” of the classical and modern theorists, combined with a new perspective based on the dynamic strategic environment of today, this “hybrid” theory, coupled with the use of the “War Tetrahedron,” adds a valuable tool to the tool kit of the next generation of strategic leaders.

Endnotes

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